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ABSTRACT

A discussion of communicative task-based second language learning looks at what differentiates a number of related classroom approaches: (1) two orientations, one focusing on learning-to-communicate and the other on communicating-to-learn; (2) emphasis on input, reception, and analysis in contrast to emphasis on communicative tasks; (3) specification of language content and related tasks; and (4) classroom procedures. The focus is on the teaching of English as a second language. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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COMMUNICATIVE TASK-BASED LEARNING: What does it resolve?

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In the literature on task-based learning, reference is made to both language learning tasks and communication tasks. In order to avoid confusion, the term communicative task-based learning (CTBL) will be used to refer to those proposals in which communal communicative tasks, planned for pairs or groups of language learners, are central. It is some of these current CBTL proposals that will be evaluated here, in terms of language specifications and methodological procedures. In order to prepare the ground for this evaluation, a brief sketch of some relevant developments in EFL pedagogy over the last few decades will be preceded by a background to syllabus and method in the field.

Syllabus and Method: a brief background

In terms of content, syllabus specifications usually refer to the units, the criteria for selection and the principles for developmental sequencing of the expected intake. This is particularly true of what Wilkins (1976) calls synthetic syllabuses, the units of which have included structural forms, notional meanings, functional intentions, lexical items and even strategies, as the focus for expected intake for future production. The specifications of such syllabuses usually apply to expected core or communal language intake. Syllabuses at the analytic end of the spectrum, tend not to include specifications of expected communal language intake at all. In the latter

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cases, the supposition is that the social and psycholinguistic processes take precedence over language products, so that expected intake specifications would be contradictory.

With reference to classroom processes and procedures, we can identify two main currents: (i) the learning-to-communicate and (ii) the communicate-to-learn. The US audiolingual and original UK present-practice-produce paradigms were very much in the learn-to-communicate camp, with strong psycholinguistic (skill acquisition) learning bases, accompanied by synthetic syllabus specifications for the focus on expected language intake, for correct and fluent future production. In the communicate-to-learn orientations pre-planning is minimal since they assume a social interaction process basis, so that learning evolves out of discourse constructed socially through the exchange of meanings/ messages. In this latter case, the accessibility of the input to which learners are exposed, by means of control/ adjustment, is central. The preoccupation with the (skill) learning approaches has been the potential transfer of the learning to natural communicative contexts, while the preoccupation of the communication approaches has been learning questions, especially how to expand language ability and ensure reasonable levels of correctness, in production (Skehan, 1996). The contrasts between the communicate-to learn and the learn-to-communicate orientations are summarized in the table below.

ORIENTATION	learn (psychological)	communicate (social)
PRIORITY	expansion/ correctness	message/ fluency
CONSEQUENCE	focus on expected intake	control/ adjust input
REDRESS	transfer/ fluency	expansion/ correctness

Precursors to Communicative Task-Based Learning

Most of the debate in the British EFL tradition has been about modifications to recognized conventional practice, and the following generalizations about evolutions in contemporary thinking are relevant to the present discussion. At the beginner levels, the strong emphasis on learning a series of specified structures for correct oral production gave way to a greater emphasis on meaning units. The emphasis remained on production, with some exceptions, and led naturally to a concern for meaning in conversational discourse. This concern was accompanied by calls for a move away from more controlled form focus and practice to more meaningful language focus and practice, including role-playing. In order to encourage the transfer of controlled learning to communicative interaction, more open-ended pair and groupwork tasks, were added to the range of possible classroom language activities. These tended to be problem-solving in nature, usually of limited duration, and they used the information gap principle of dividing up information between the participants. At the (pre-)intermediate levels, itemized language focus generally gave way to skill focus, and reading input tended to become more central. More recently, common core activities have sometimes been supplemented, or even replaced, by options such as self-access reading or group projects.

In addition to these tendencies, two additional viewpoints seem to be recurrent in much of the contemporary literature on conventional ELT: on the one hand, that there should be a greater emphasis on input, reception and analysis; and on the other, that communicative tasks should be given a more central and prominent role. These two viewpoints are not entirely compatible as we shall see, but in passing, as it is the latter that will occupy most of the remainder of this discussion.

Communicative Task-Based Learning

In CTBL, since the communicative task is central, implicitly CTBL proposals would only be applicable once the learners have a minimum of productive ability. Therefore, no reference will be made to questions of when initial language production might be expected to occur, or what form it might take. Willis (1996) does dedicate a chapter to initial learners, but since the types of suggested classroom activity contrast so much with her basic framework for CTBL, they could hardly be classified as CTBL. The following is a fairly typical framework for CTBL:

<-pre-task work->	COMMUNICATIVE TASK	<-post-task work->

The major rationale for CTBL is to prioritize conversational interaction between learners, so that they learn to converse by conversing. In actual fact, there is an implicit assumption that the focus is really on oral expression in conversation, and that most of the preparation and feedback is on productive performance. In this sense, CBTL is a progression of the productive approaches, but with a greater emphasis on more spontaneous social interaction.

So, the current CTBL proposals may be seen as a development of and/or a reaction against the prevailing conventions that preceded them (Willis, 1996, for example). On the one hand, they reject (i) the itemized specifications of the synthetic syllabuses, and (ii) the assumed one-by-one focus with (iii) mastery in production as a requirement for progression, since research on natural language learning contradicts a linear progression in mastering language items (Pienemann, 1985). On the other hand, they question the psychological skill learning approaches, in favour of the social interaction ones. A central argument for the latter position is that, since

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it is not possible to predict the order or the manner in which features of the language will be acquired for production, it would not be possible to plan their learning.

language specifications

Nevertheless, there is still a concern with specifying the language content (for expected productive use) of those communicate-to-learn orientations which centre around oral expression in communal communicative tasks. Both Willis (1990) and Long and Crookes (1992) are singular in that they they both reject other specifications of syllabus for communicative language teaching in favour of their own. However, the bases of these specifications could not be more different. Willis (1990) adopts the apparently scientific basis of word frequency from which to work up, and Long and Crookes (1992) target tasks from which to work down to pedagogic tasks. I will not dwell on the significant number of flaws in Willis (1990), beyond saying that it is impossible to modify input to the learners, or limit learner output, to scientifically determined frequency specifications, in a natural way. Consequently, Willis has to tinker with his seemingly scientific solution and settle for word frequency, with an unfortunate number of subjective modifications, as a possible basis for some language focus. The credibility of Willis's supposedly scientific contribution is further undermined by the fact that the focused items occur in tasks which are intuitively graded, and their selection and sequencing is left unresolved except in terms of progressive word frequency bands for different levels - see Bruton (1997) for a further discussion.

Among the numerous defects in Long and Crookes (1992) is the basic fact that most communication cannot be perceived as a task especially since Long

(1985) himself defines task as being "a piece of work" (p.89). Conversing, for example, could hardly be termed a task in most contexts. Long also defines tasks as "things people *do* in everyday life" (p.89), and thus implies an instigator/ initiator role. But would having one's haircut be a task? For this reason, Long and Crookes' target tasks, and consequently their pedagogic tasks, would have little descriptive validity. Likewise, the target tasks, and the pedagogic tasks, probably have even less psycholinguistic validity, in the sense that we are unlikely to internalize or assimilate tasks. If target tasks are taken as kinds of macro-function, the language specifications would be virtually impossible and the sequencing even more so. Even if we accepted the resulting pedagogic tasks in the FL classroom context, they would suppose some form of target role and probably artificial role simulation, especially by those participants playing the non-target roles - see Bruton (1993) for a full discussion of Long and Crookes. If, on the other hand, tasks were understood literally as "pieces of work", any type of possible target/ model specification would be even more remote, particularly in the case of divergent tasks or the whole gamut of projects. More recently Long, along with Robinson (Long & Robinson, 1998, p.25), sees no inconvenience in including problem-solving tasks as examples of pedagogical tasks, which are hardly the most natural reflection of probable targets for most language learners. The delineations of tasks and the types of task type that are adopted as the point of departure, therefore, are complicated issues which would have to be resolved before any attempt is made at language specification.

Skehan (1996) offers a very useful framework of criteria for assessing potential processing load in language tasks, which can be used to compare and, perhaps, grade and sequence different tasks. He shows how different combinations of information load, language demands and circumstantial

elements, such as time available, affect language performance. However, he sidesteps the questions of task type and possible target needs, along with language specifications and the initial grading of benchmark tasks. His orientation, like Long and Crookes, basically follows in the production tradition since little reference is made to input and receptive capacities.

A major paradox of communicative tasks in the EFL classroom is that, by definition, the more open-ended they are the less predictable the expected language, and vice versa. The tasks with more predictable expected language are generally those that reflect greater external control and preparation, precisely because they permit some form of communal language specification for production. But most CTBL proposals assume open-ended communicative tasks as being central, and therefore the issues become ones of methodology rather than design (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). Which takes us on to some of these methodological issues.

procedures

In methodological terms, since it is communicative tasks which are the building block around which classroom activity revolves in CTBL, language learning tasks such as those described by Fotos and Ellis (1991), for example, will not be considered. The core tasks are characterized as emphasizing open-ended communication in groups (or pairs), to increase the learners' capacity to interact communicatively, and with greater fluency. It is not entirely surprising that the major work on task-based sequencing has been in terms of communicative processing load factors (Bygate, 1996; Skehan, 1996), therefore, and at post-beginner levels. However, in Jones's (1992) study there is little evidence that learners expand their language through these tasks. There is also every likelihood that monolingual groups of EFL learners might reinforce

existing classroom pidgins (Sheen, 1994), even if expected processing load factors are regulated to maximize potential correctness, as Skehan (1996) suggests. Consequently, we find that most of the language expansion and correctness focus occurs under teacher supervision before or after the tasks, or in pre- and post-task work (Willis, 1996). This is to be expected since one of the features of communicative tasks is the lack of any direct teacher participation, and, therefore, a lack of spontaneous teacher input or feedback.

However, apart from the logistics of monitoring group/ pairwork in large classes, pre- and post-task work have their limitations. It is not clear how much direct effect pre-task work might have on an ensuing task, that is, in the short-term, and, if there were an effect, how much and what type of pre-task work would be necessary. And more significantly, the more unpredictable the task the less reliable any linguistic preparation for it. Consequently, post-task activity becomes crucial for the types of task typically used in CTBL. But, given the ephemeral nature of oral interaction, there is little reason to believe that delayed feedback, or further input, will be perceived as being radically different from just further input, with all the resulting standard methodological implications. One common assumption (Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996), that having the groups prepare a report task on the communicative task itself for public presentation will increase accuracy and language expansion, makes one question the purpose of the original communicative task. Finally, the differing degrees of potential predictability of the language used in tasks does not deter Willis (1996) from encouraging the use of recordings of native speakers spontaneously performing scripted tasks for analysis, however.

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Conclusion

CTBL makes the open-ended communicative task performed communally in groups the common core, in response to the previous emphasis on language expansion and correctness in production. Consequently, it is precisely planned language expansion and correctness that become a central preoccupation of CTBL, without mentioning the omission of receptive capacity development, especially interactive listening. What this demonstrates is that any attempt to prioritize one set of critical core factors over another will not eliminate the latter.

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